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Romance With America: Americanization in The Bluest Eye and The House on Mango Street

*Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" But Frieda was asleep. And I didn't know.*

Claudia, The Bluest Eye

*Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life.*

Esperanza, The House on Mango Street

Emerging identity focuses much of the study of what is called American ethnic literature.<sup>1</sup> Characteristic to this study, is defining the specificities of experience unique to a particular ethnic group carving out its niche in the "American" identity. While evaluating these specificities is valuable to productive understanding of American ethnic texts, their placement as American texts serves an important role in accurate contextualization of the issues the texts confront. It is on such a basis that comparative critique of American ethnic texts serves the scholarship surrounding these texts and that I position this paper. Reading Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street in a comparative context allows an investigation of parallel identity issues that are represented through cultural specificity.

Two of the overarching identity issues within each novel are assimilation into a mainstream de-ethnicized white American identity<sup>2</sup> for the non-white American and how this assimilation affects women. Stated another way, the theoretical question becomes: how do

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non-white women take hold of the ideologies implicit within the “American Dream”<sup>3</sup> and make them their own? This question is of value for analyzing the process of American assimilation, or Americanization, which is completed through attaining the American Dream of belonging to the American community. Full assimilation as an “American” would result in ownership of American ideologies, recognition by other “Americans” as one of them, and full participation in the privileges granted to already assimilated “Americans.” I argue that in both texts the desire for physical beauty and romantic fantasy is both a metaphor for the overall process of Americanization and an example of the insidious nature of this Americanization that plays out in racialized and gendered scenarios for the African American community in The Bluest Eye and the Chicano community in The House on Mango Street. In making this comparison I do not mean to deny either novel or community its particularities of content and experience respectively. My goal in pairing these novels is to illuminate what I can only think to term “the fact of Americanness” each novel reveals. In other words, both novels, in similar but distinct ways, demonstrate that Americanization is not just a process the immigrant to America undergoes but, rather, it is a function of being placed in American culture whether by birth or emigration. The factor that most effectively brings The Bluest Eye and The House on Mango Street together is the simplicity of their both being American novels which means that all of the characters of each novel will inevitably respond to the American Dream.

This Dream promises community, security and fulfillment to all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, class etc., and holds out the hope that all are welcome and all belong if they are American. However, the American Dream begins to break down when the people pursuing it possess differences from the mainstream culture in the very factors the American Dream claims to eliminate as impediments to this belonging. This breakdown is what links the American Dream to romantic fantasies that, by definition, can never deliver what

they promise. Like the American Dream, romantic fantasy presents a pattern of subjectivity to an exclusive ideology of human fulfillment characterized by both a dependence on an external force to fulfill one's desires and the illusion of inclusivity. The desires reflect the presence of pre-existing physical, emotional, and spiritual needs common to humanity such as food and shelter, love and validation, and purpose and transcendence above life's hardships. The exclusive ideology itself works as the force that defines both the prerequisites for worthiness to have one's physical, emotional and spiritual needs met and the parameters of how these needs will be met. It is these prerequisites and parameters that make such an ideology exclusive rather than inclusive because they are narrow in scope and definition, allowing only the "right" people to enjoy the "right" dream. One becomes subjected to an exclusive ideology of human fulfillment, first, by acknowledging one's human needs whether consciously or subconsciously; second, through exposure to the exclusive ideology that presents itself as capable of meeting those needs; third, by believing that the exclusive ideology will bring about the fulfillment it promises due to apparent supporting evidence for that fulfillment and regardless of evidence to the contrary; and, finally, through the absence of another ideology that would expose the emptiness of the exclusive ideology.

The imaginary nature of romantic fantasy, produced both by the mind and, itself, an illusion, functions as both promise and fulfillment under this pattern of subjectivity, exemplifying a process of control that is at the heart of the American Dream. This control is exercised simultaneously by the romantic dreamer, who translates the exclusive ideology of romance to her own desired outcomes in her imagination, and by the exclusive ideology, which has provided the particular path to fulfillment through romantic love. Similarly, since the American Dream centers on being in control of one's belonging, the invitation to create one's own translation of the American Dream, through imagination, is an invitation to meet the desire

for control through the specified path of ownership. In both cases, the ability to control imaginary outcomes in the mind masks the power the exclusive ideology has over its subject to surfeit longing while never fulfilling it.

Physical beauty works closely with romantic fantasy as a gateway to the fantasy's realization, becoming the prerequisite for worthiness to obtain the fantasy's promised fulfillment. That women who are considered physically beautiful also often seem to be engaged in romance, especially in American popular culture media, such as movies, appears to be evidence that physical beauty is a prerequisite to romantic fulfillment. In the same way, the American Dream appears to be possible for those who can fit into a mold of a person with a de-ethnicized white racial make-up and a middle-class or better economic status. Again, this image of the American achieving the American Dream is often supported through American cultural mediums such as television, which Cisneros uses in The House on Mango Street, and education tools such as the Dick and Jane primer Morrison uses to frame The Bluest Eye. How, then, do these fantasies thrive if not every woman is beautiful according to American culture and not everyone pursuing the American Dream is white and middle-class? The appearance of inclusion built into these exclusive ideologies of human fulfillment sustains their use. In the beauty/romance dream the idea that everyone has a soul mate provides the hope that one's soul mate would not be concerned with physical beauty but with inner beauty. In the American Dream the idea of equality of opportunity, primarily through education and hard work, maintains the hope that in America one is valued for his/her productivity, which can be developed, rather than one's ethnicity. That physical beauty and romantic fantasy are encouraged in American women strengthens the groundwork for their use as tropes in illuminating the issues of identity development for the women of The Bluest Eye and The House on Mango Street. The value placed on physical beauty and romantic fantasy for

American women demonstrates how a novel about an African American community and a Chicano community can parallel each other in the issues both communities face in grappling with what it means to be non-white and American.

In order to analyze the Americanization process at work in the characters of The Bluest Eye and The House on Mango Street<sup>4</sup>, I have divided my essay into three topical categories that demonstrate the process of subjectivity to the American Dream, an exclusive ideology of human fulfillment. Using romantic fantasies, I will discuss the desire to be loved and belong as the necessary impetus for succumbing to these fantasies in spite of their inequities. In this first section, I chose the examples of Pauline Breedlove's adolescent fantasies, Marin's fantasy of working downtown, and Rafaela's post-marital fantasy of a man who would rescue her from her empty house. The second section analyzes the function of physical beauty in both novels, wherein I investigate it as the path to love and belonging sought after in the romantic fantasies. I draw upon Pauline's desire to fit into her Midwestern urban community and "education" at the movies, Pauline's daughter, Pecola's, desire for beauty as derived from her mother, Marin's marketing of beauty through selling Avon products, and Esperanza's transformation from child to woman through high-heeled shoes. Finally, I evaluate the idea of ownership as the evidence of belonging through Pauline's vicarious ownership of her wealthy white employer's household luxuries and Esperanza's desire to own a house.

#### The Desire for Love and Belonging: Romantic Fantasies

The American Dream plays out in one's imagination very like a romance. It courts the heart to devotion to the cause of equality for all people and, in this equality, to find oneself and one's destiny. Conveniently, the American Dream also shows its beloved, the "American," what this destiny looks like. It promises only the finest lifestyle for the cherished citizens of

democracy filled with perfect health, eternal happiness, and abundance. The romantic fantasies I've chosen to focus on, those of Pauline, Marin, and Rafaela, share the characteristics of removing one's agency and placing it in the hands of a nameless man who will love them and to whom they will belong. As a metaphor for desiring the American Dream, these romantic longings illustrate the longing of placing one's agency in the American Dream to provide love and belonging for American citizens. Furthermore, each of the fantasies is connected to the larger idea of fulfilling the American Dream through them.

Pauline Breedlove's fantasies begin during her adolescence and recur during her married years as a woman pregnant with her first child. At age fifteen, Pauline has settled into keeping her mother's house, having been out of school for many years, but "[f]antasies about men and love and touching were drawing her mind and hands away from her work" (TBE 113). These fantasies are characterized by passiveness as she "[is] usually idling by the river bank, or gathering berries in a field when a someone appear[s], with gentle and penetrating eyes, who— with no exchange of words—understood" (113). Pauline's voice is literally unnecessary in this exchange as if all the "someone" needs to know is confirmed through his "penetrating eyes." The identity of the "someone" Pauline fantasizes about defies description, suggesting that Pauline's love will be directed toward an idea rather than a person: "[t]he someone had no face, no form, no voice, no odor. He was a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of rest" (113). This description alludes to an equation of the "someone" with God of whom Ivy sings in the church choir and the image of which Pauline conflates with her meeting Cholly Breedlove whom she soon afterward marries (114). When Pauline's ideas of romance are shattered by Cholly's abuse and their mutual failure to fulfill the romantic images she later sees in the movies, she replaces it with a fervent devotion to her church and to the wealthy white family she works for, the Fishers. In line with Pauline's adolescent

passiveness, her lack of knowledge of love between a man and woman is no obstacle to her fulfillment because that knowledge is laid in the hands of the Presence:

It did not matter that [Pauline] had no idea of what to do or say to the Presence—after the wordless knowing and the soundless touching, her dreams disintegrated. But the Presence would know what to do. She had only to lay her head on his chest and he would lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods . . . forever. (113)

Pauline's fantasies do not require her personal action or understanding of life in any way. What she does not know becomes irrelevant in the fantasy because her fantasy is one of dependence. Pauline wants nothing to do with her own fulfillment except in longing for it.

This scene from Pauline's adolescence sets up the initial longing rooted in her human need for love and connection with someone who would acknowledge her as worthy to be known. In this stage of Pauline's life, she has lived in rural Alabama and experienced her own family's migration north to Kentucky on the advice of family and neighbors who told them of the "possibility of living better in another place" (TBE 111). The language that Morrison uses here is reminiscent of the early dreams of colonists and later immigrants to America who came to develop what they thought would be a better life for themselves. In Kentucky, Pauline's family moves into a five-room house with a yard in a "real town" with "ten to fifteen houses on a single street, with water piped right into the kitchen" (112). This move also parallels the dispersal of most of Pauline's ten siblings when a few of her brothers join the army during World War I, two sisters get married and one sister dies, "increasing the living space and giving the entire Kentucky venture a feel of luxury" (112). This feel of luxury is significant in its allusion to desirable American prosperity and it placing Pauline in a position of greater visibility in her family since she now cares for the house and her two younger twin brothers



with her mother at work all day for a white minister (112). It is also significant that this luxury did not come about through financial independence for her father or mother, but through reduction in family size. The feeling of prosperity through loss indicates its falseness since under the original family size there would not have been the same feeling of luxury.

At the inception of Pauline's romantic fantasies, then, she has already had her first introduction to the American Dream by moving seemingly toward prosperity and a higher standard of living. About this time, when Pauline's desires to meet a man who would love and take care of her were growing, she meets Cholly, who appears to be the answer to this need for love and security. He becomes part of Pauline's Americanization both because he meets her initial romantic fantasies and he continues her migration north to Lorain, Ohio, where "steel mills were begging for workers" (TBE 116). This first scene of Pauline's romantic fantasies serve to establish her need for love, acceptance and security and illustrate how she is introduced to the elements of the American Dream, namely economic prosperity at this time, that will be the foundation for her process of Americanization. This process, in Pauline's case, is one of fully embracing the insidious ideologies of mainstream middle-class Americans who desire to blend into the background of a mythical homogeneous American identity.

Marin's dreams of romance follow a similar pattern of softly lit staging in The House on Mango Street. Esperanza, the protagonist who narrates her own development into womanhood through vignettes, talks about Marin's romantic dreams in the vignette named for her. Like Pauline, Esperanza tells us in "Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin," Marin spends much of her time indoors caring for her younger cousins and "stand[ing] in the doorway a lot, all the time singing, clicking her fingers, the same song: *Apples, peaches, pumpkin pah-ay./You're in love and so am ah-ay*" (HMS original emphasis 24). Marin, who is from Puerto Rico, takes in

the ideas of American popular culture, singing the song she hears on the radio and wearing “lots of make-up she gets from selling Avon” (23). Symbolically, Marin’s position in her aunt’s house of “stand[ing] in the doorway,” while her aunt is away from home, and being restricted to staying in front of the house, when her aunt comes home from work, represent Marin’s inability to enter the outside world on her own. The farthest she can move is just beyond the front door where “the boys [can] see [her] and . . . [she] can see them” (27). Marin’s hopes for experiencing life beyond her aunt’s house lay in whether or not a “boy” will see her.

The “boy” whom Marin wants to see her, however, is of a very specific type—an American businessman. Esperanza relates that

Marin says that if she stays here next year, she’s going to get a real job downtown because that’s where the best jobs are, since you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away. (HMS 26)

Like Pauline, Marin’s fantasies require little effort on her part. Marin’s passivity is in part because romantic fantasies require the passivity of the dreamer and partially because of Marin’s restriction to her aunt’s house and limited options for her self-determination. Marin tells Esperanza about her boyfriend in Puerto Rico whom she is supposed to marry but who does not yet have a job. Marin is undaunted by his unemployment since “she’s saving the money she gets from selling Avon and taking care of her cousins” (26). Her present reality contrasts sharply with the hope of her romantic aspirations—either to marry her current boyfriend or to meet a wealthy American man who will “take [her] to live in a big house far away.” It is precisely the romantic fantasy that enables Marin to ignore the evidence in her own life of its

hollow nature exemplified in her unemployed boyfriend. While she focuses on the fantasy, Marin cannot critically evaluate her circumstances and determine how to operate from the reality she is actually living. Instead, the fantasy allows Marin to place that responsibility into an unnamed, and therefore blameless, masculine savior whose broken promises can never be confronted.

Marin also seems to believe that she has a lot more agency over her future than her fantasies reveal. She is invested in imagining her future romantic goals through maneuvers that she believes will ensure their attainment in “saving the money she gets from selling Avon” and planning to “get a real job downtown” (HMS 26). These imagined plans, again, distract Marin from seeking out an identity apart from romance, confining her to “singing the same song somewhere. . . . waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (26). The “someone” for whom Marin waits is like the “Presence” that Pauline is sure will rescue her from keeping her mother’s house. He will appear out of nowhere, perhaps even in a mystical way, certainly mysteriously, and provide the transformation that Marin desires. Significantly, Marin’s romantic dreams require her movement to be fulfilled. So while she waits in front of her aunt’s house for the boys to see her, she does not expect to be fulfilled by the boys in her neighborhood. Instead, she will either move back to Puerto Rico to her boyfriend or move her occupation downtown to move into American life by living “in a big house far away.” Marin, then, sees nothing within her community or any resources within herself, which can fulfill her desire for a changed life.

While Marin is confined by her aunt’s guardianship and her conviction that only a man can change her life, Rafaela is a literal prisoner in her home because “her husband is afraid [she] will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (HMS 79). Her time is occupied

mostly by sitting by her window and leaning on her elbow. Though Rafaela, like Pauline, knows that marriage is far different from her hopes she still succumbs to fantasies, of escape—she “dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s. On the corner there is music from the bar, and Rafaela wishes she could go there and dance before she gets old” (79). Rafaela’s fantasies are rooted in movement like Pauline’s and Marin’s. For Rafaela, movement means freedom to enjoy life and to interact with others in her community through dancing. Dancing would allow Rafaela a personal and artistic expression of herself but Esperanza’s reference to Rapunzel suggests that personal expression for Rafaela is wrapped up in dependence on a man. Stating that Rafaela “dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s” calls attention to the fact that Rapunzel’s hair is both blond and beautiful and the source of romantic fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Rafaela’s dream is specifically connected to a Euro-American imaginary. Her particular desire for sweet drinks further reveals Rafaela’s Americanized version of romance:

Rafaela who drinks and drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays and wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys. And always there is someone offering sweeter drinks, someone promising to keep them on a silver string. (80)

While Rafaela dreams of freedom from her house and loneliness, she still desires a man to “keep [her] on a silver string” and be the source of her freedom. The “sweeter drinks” that this “someone” will offer suggest a sweetness that is different and better (sweeter) than the sweet drinks of coconut and papaya of “the island.” Combining the idea of Rapunzel with Rafaela’s desire for more than the sweet drinks of the island, shows Rafaela in the process of leaving

behind her reminiscence of immigrant origins to find romantic fulfillment in her new home of America.

Like Pauline, whom Cholly leaves behind for his friends, Rafaela is forgotten both by her husband and by Esperanza and the other children playing near her house until she asks them to buy her coconut or papaya juice. Esperanza tells the reader “[a] long time passes and we forget she is up there watching” (79 – 80). Rafaela’s and Pauline’s non-existence to the community around them demonstrate its complacency with producing women who remain at home or engaged in activities that will occupy their minds with unfulfilled longing and keep them controlled. Both Rafaela and Pauline are left alone with their fantasies, signaling a separation from the life of the community and the opportunity to become detached from its real life circumstances. This detachment is evident in Rafaela’s romanticized vision of women in the dance hall down the street. She sees them as free to “open homes with keys” and constantly engaged in romance and security. Since Rafaela has not been to the dance hall, she truly has no idea of how these women’s lives really play out. She imagines that these women are both self-reliant and cared for but her microcosm of married life and restriction to her home makes her out of touch with the circumstances of these women’s lives. Thus, Rafaela is not only physically imprisoned in her house, but mentally and emotionally imprisoned by an inability to see and evaluate her fantasies against reality.

#### How to Be Loved and Belong: Physical Beauty

Once agency is removed from the dreamer in romantic fantasy, the fantasy takes over and subjects the dreamer to its patterns of value and worth. One of the primary ways this happens is through the prerequisites to fulfillment of the fantasy. Physical beauty enters the picture, providing the most effective means of the dreamer’s continued submission to the fantasy.

While visually engrossed with whether or not one's physical appearance measures up to the standard, one loses sight of her fundamental value as a human being. Love becomes a reward for the ability to play a part, for performance, rather than a gift bestowed from the self-reflective conviction of one's own need for love in spite of the inability to perform. The emphasis on physical beauty in the romantic fantasy destroys the hope of love for either the "beautiful" or "ugly" through cheapening love's value by boxing it with conditions. This same destruction is at work in the American Dream, as its prerequisites of race and class for fulfillment, nullify the promise of equality that it professes. In the following examples, Pauline's attachment to movies, Pecola's desire for blue eyes, Marin's selling Avon, and Esperanza's wearing of high-heeled shoes, the parallel of performativity of physical beauty and destruction is evident and intertwines with the destructiveness of the American Dream.

When Cholly and Pauline move to Lorain, Ohio, Cholly takes a job at a steel mill and Pauline is at home, keeping house and trying to integrate herself into her community through friendships with other black women. As she does so, Pauline finds that in order to gain their acceptance, she must fall within certain guidelines of appearance and behavior. Pauline still does not measure up to these guidelines and remains an outsider, but subjected to her longing to belong:

The women in the town wore high-heeled shoes, and when Pauline tried to wear them, they aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp. . . . [The women] were amused by [Pauline] because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly. Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying "chil'ren") and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes.

When Cholly began to quarrel about the money she wanted, she decided to go to work. . .

. The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way. (TBE 118)

Significantly, Pauline's attempts to fit into her community become a crippling agent, illustrated through her limp. Her already lame foot, from a childhood accident, becomes aggravated and draws attention to her inability to measure up to the false standard of value her community has set. Pauline's lame foot metaphorically parallels her blackness in a white world where her race makes her unfit to belong while highlighting the Lorain black community as a simulacrum of white mainstream America, to which they are marginal, if not invisible. The connection between rejection and desire demonstrates not only how deep the human need to belong is but why the exclusionary standards of an exclusive ideology do not clearly alert themselves as such to the outsider. Pauline has come to Lorain from another part of the country, knowing that this town is different from her home. Her knowledge of her newcomer status makes Pauline eager to learn how to shed it in order to shed the discomfort of physical, emotional and relational displacement. Rejection signals to Pauline that she has not shed this outsider status and has foreclosed her ability to belong. Since insider status for Pauline's community in Lorain hinges upon artificially defined definitions of human value, Pauline will remain an outsider but will be convinced that more earnest performance will make her an insider.

Pauline starts going to the movies after suffering from extreme loneliness by staying in her small home all day, having later quit her job due to pregnancy, with nothing to occupy her and no one with whom she feels comfortable to talk to. The movies that Pauline sees remind her of her earlier romantic fantasies with the added element of physical beauty (TBE 122 – 23). While Morrison and Cisneros both show that physical beauty functions as the gateway to romantic love, Morrison plays out the effects of a beauty standard on someone who knows

herself to be ugly compared to it. Pauline begins to “equat[e] physical beauty with virtue” and when she compares herself to the women she sees in the movies she “stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (122). Morrison’s references to stripping and binding allude to enslavement and the degradation that arises out of it. Through Pauline’s “education in the movies,” Morrison indicts the mental enslavement in Pauline’s so called development as a more seasoned member of her community: “[Pauline] regarded love as possessive mating and romance the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way” (122). Not only is Pauline imprisoned to these romantic fantasies, but her bondage affects the freedom of those whom she wants to show love.

Pauline’s availability to take on these destructive emotions come from both her loneliness and her established pattern of allowing others to define the fulfillment of her needs. What becomes incredibly powerful about Pauline’s watching these movies is the way film takes on the omniscient narrator perspective through the lens of the camera which, in turn, becomes the eye of the viewer. This omniscient point of view is, theoretically, the view of authority wherein the viewer can see “the whole story.” Since Pauline has been accustomed to letting others tell her how the world works and how to think and feel, this omniscient perspective of film fits right into her comfort level of experiencing life. Her teenage romantic fantasies were those of passively receiving whatever direction her formless lover would lead her to. Now, the movies are that fantasy that she is a passive participant in. Pauline watches other women live out her fantasies on a stage that does not even present the tangibility of a live performance: “There [in the movies] at last were the darkened woods, the lonely roads, the river banks, the gentle knowing eyes. There the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt



threw away their crutches. Their death was dead, and people made every gesture in a cloud of music" (TBE 122). Not only is the fantasy scripted, but it is recorded, so that its interpretation can be spun out again and again, "projected through the ray of light from above and behind" (122).

A movie has particular appeal because of its immediate gratification and its lack of requirement of work from the viewer.<sup>6</sup> The viewer is often not even required to think critically because the movie will produce the conclusions it desires the viewer to retain. What is more, the omniscient lens of the camera will make the viewer believe that he/she has done the thinking and has come to the movie's conclusions based on the connections he/she has made from what has been witnessed. Pauline's retelling of why she goes to the movies illustrates their power to produce conclusions:

*The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They'd cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. (TBE, original emphasis 123).*

As a tool of Americanization, film works ideologically by often presenting "American" values while simultaneously defining those values and the prerequisites to attaining them. More significantly, these American ideologies are effectively instilled because of the false sense of power the viewer experiences in feeling in control by being the omniscient perspective of the movie's action. The viewer also feels in control because he/she reasons that he/she has chosen to accept the unreality of the movie as reality for a short time in order to enjoy the movie. The

false control of the omniscient viewer's perspective brings about a false sense of security in his/her viewing judgment and allows the viewer to succumb to the conclusions the screen writer, director, actors and cinematographers want the viewer to make. Pauline experiences this false sense of security even while she clearly sees how these movies contrast with her own reality: "*Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard*" (original emphasis 123). While Pauline finds pleasure in watching these romantic movies, she is experiencing their influence over her expectations in her life but not finding fault with the movies' message, only her own life.

The cycle of a lifestyle of fantasy is passed down to Pauline's daughter Pecola, evidenced in Pecola's desire for blue eyes. While Pecola's ambition to fulfill her fantasy has extreme results (her madness from believing she has received blue eyes, which have rectified her father's raping her), the development of Pecola's desire is grounded in the pattern of romantic fantasy. Pecola sees blue eyes, or white physical beauty, as the solution to her suffering from the domestic turmoil in her home (TBE 46). She is convinced that "[a]s long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people [her parents]" (45). Pecola, then, must be removed from her circumstances in order to find fulfillment, and this removal would only come from a miracle: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time" (46). Her prayers are rooted in the fantasy of transformation that, like the other romantic fantasies, contrast with her lived reality of racially marked physical permanence. When Pecola is confronted with white people's disdain for her blackness she retreats into another facet of her fantasy. This retreat is evident when Pecola senses Mr. Yacobowski's "distaste for her . . . blackness" (49) as she is trying to communicate her desire to buy the Mary Jane candies in his

store. She medicates her shame from his rejection with eating the Mary Jane candy because to “eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50) and momentarily realize her fantasy.

The source of Pecola’s retreat into fantasies in order to insulate herself from the cruel experiences she faces in her family life and at her school is evident in looking more closely at her relationship with her mother, Pauline. The scene in which Pecola accidentally knocks over a hot blueberry cobbler onto the Fisher’s floor presents an example of the relationship through which Pecola has first ascertained her own self-worth. In this scene, Claudia and Frieda have come to the Fisher’s house looking for Pecola and while waiting inside the kitchen after Pauline invites them in to wait while she gets her family’s wash, Pecola somehow spills a fresh blueberry cobbler on the kitchen floor while trying to get a better look at it. The contrast between her mother’s reaction to Pecola’s mistake, a reaction full of merciless anger, and to the Fisher’s young daughter, whom Pauline comforts when she becomes upset by the disturbance, is enough to show Pecola where Pauline’s affections are rooted—in the Fisher family. What would solidify this suspicion is the repetitive factor in Pecola seeing her mother’s different treatment of herself and the little Fisher girl. Ostensibly, Pecola goes to the Fisher’s house regularly to pick up her own family’s laundry, which Pauline washes there while at work. In the cobbler scene, Pecola is not even in the house at first, she is waiting outside, like a servant. Meanwhile a girl younger than Pecola has full run of the house and authority over Pauline, calling her Polly and telling her to “come here.” Her questions of Pauline “Who were they, Polly?” indicate she does not know Pecola or her relation to Pauline (TBE 108). A hierarchy of recognition is, thus, established in this scene: Pecola is outside and unknown to the Fishers; Pauline is inside the house but only as a servant; and a small child is living in the luxurious house and reigning over both of them. Pecola sees this hierarchy, though she may not be

conscious of its implications, and sees that the little blond-haired girl is living in comfort and, more importantly, is receiving love from her mother that she has not personally experienced as her daughter. It would not be difficult for Pecola to conclude that since her mother is continually finding fault with her, and her parents with each other, that the problem lays in her not being “beautiful” and that beauty, defined as blond-haired and blue-eyed. She sees how the little Fisher girl is treated, how teachers and classmates treat her with contempt at school and that she does not resemble popular movie icons with blond hair and blue eyes like Shirley Temple, whom everyone adores.

Solidifying the message of rejection Pecola gleans from her mother, confirmed in this scene, is the scene’s setting in the wealthy lake front property of Lorain. The impact of this scene being set in this area of Lorain rather than in Pecola’s neighborhood comes through in Claudia’s description of her and Frieda’s walk to the Fisher house to see Pecola. As Claudia and Frieda approach this neighborhood, they come to Lake Shore Park which is a “city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, [and] picnic tables” (TBE 105). Claudia relates that “Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams” (105). Before Claudia and Frieda even arrive at the Fisher house they encounter public reminders that they are outsiders to this neighborhood with a city park that is “sweetly expectant of clean, white, well-behaved children and parents” (105). Interestingly, the Fisher house is located just before the park entrance and is well know to the black community as the “big white house with the wheel barrow full of flowers” (103). This house serves as a kind of icon of representative beauty, wealth, and American life, almost guarding the entrance to the sacred park reserved for whites who are “clean” and “well-behaved.” Claudia demonstrates an internalized understanding of her place as a black little girl in this setting that is off-limits to her when she explains her and Frieda’s quick movement to the rear of the Fisher house when they arrive:

“Only fear of discovery and the knowledge that *we did not belong* kept up from loitering. We circled the proud house and went to the back” (my emphasis 106). Under these circumstances of restriction from the privileges of the whites in her community, Pecola is constantly reminded of her lowered position within it and the association of that position with her blackness.

The desire for beauty functions as imprisonment in The House on Mango Street as well, defining both standards for belonging and the disillusionment with striving for those standards. Marin sells Avon products—physical beauty is her business in the United States. This employment brings together the ideas of entrepreneurial endeavors and the marketing of physical beauty, romance, and the American Dream. As cheaper cosmetics, Avon is affordable to the working class woman. Moreover, as an in-home business, selling Avon is particularly accessible because the market is brought to the buyer’s home or is out of the distributor’s home. Thus, Marin’s selling Avon signals not only an insidious marketing of a demand for physical beauty, leading to romance, but a specifically cheapened version of an “American” beauty. In Marin’s case, accessibility to this Americanized beauty is apparently boundless and, as such, she can indulge in it to excess. Esperanza reports that Marin wears “lots of makeup she gets *free* from selling Avon” (HMS, my emphasis 23). Instead of using a little makeup to accentuate her own features, Marin covers her face in makeup, drawing attention to the makeup, rather than herself. Under this American mask, Marin hopes, as her subway fantasy indicates, to be the kind of “beautiful” woman that a man in a subway might marry (26).

Physical beauty is inextricably connected to business in Marin’s mind and to romantic fulfillment as seen in her connection of the “best jobs” with beauty and romance (HMS 26). Turning again to Marin’s fantasy, evidence that her romantic dreams are connected to the

requirements of physical beauty and the man's financial success, resides in the terms of the fantasy:

Marin says that if she stays here next year, she's going to get a real job downtown because that's where the best jobs are, since you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away. (26)

Beauty precedes romantic possibility and this romance is concluded with a man who has already attained the American Dream through ownership. Significantly, Marin associates "real" jobs with movement outside of her Chicano community. While she sees all of her jobs, Avon, baby-sitting and this desired "real job," as a means to marriage, Marin's specified desire to move to a "big house far away" indicates a desire to move away from her both her Puerto Rican origins and the Chicano community she now lives in and into mainstream American life.

Marin passes these desires for assimilation to Esperanza, evidenced in the language Marin uses to describe her fantasy. Her use of the pronoun "you" makes this scenario of downtown jobs, meaning beauty and romance, appear to be universally available, thereby making "ownership" of the scenario or dream open to whomever is listening. It is further significant that Marin speaks about her plan to work downtown as if it were easy to get a job downtown, buy all the right clothes to look beautiful, and then meet someone in the subway who also happens to have a big house to take her to. The language with which Marin describes her plan betrays its own exclusivity as a gendered version of the American Dream that appears inclusive. The only factors Marin can guarantee are that "you *always* get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes" (HMS, my emphasis 26). When she comes to the romantic fulfillment, however, her language becomes less absolute in stating that "[you] *can* meet

someone in the subway who *might* marry you and take you to live in a big house far away” (my emphasis 26). All that Marin can assure herself, and Esperanza, is that she will be seen, not that she can definitely live out her fantasy. Moreover, she fails to account for the women who will not “look beautiful” according to societal standards and for the fact that she, herself, cannot afford the kind of clothes she wants to bring about this beauty.

Cisneros provides further examples as well that demonstrate the pattern of romantic fantasy in *Mango Street*’s women. Particularly evident in Esperanza’s vignettes is the way physical beauty is turned against the women of Mango Street, thereby becoming the reason for their defeat. This defeat occurs in The Bluest Eye, but is manifested through not being able to fit the externally set beauty standard. In The House on Mango Street, the women’s fulfillment of their community’s beauty standard works against them as evidenced in Rafaela’s vignette. In “The House of Little Feet,” Esperanza and her friends, Lucy and Rachel, are given some old high heeled shoes to play with. Esperanza’s response immediately invokes romantic fantasy: “Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly” (40). Using Cinderella, again, points to a version of romance and beauty that is informed through a Euro-American imaginary of which Grimm’s Fairy Tales is a part. Like Cinderella’s magical transformation into an elegant beauty that could attract the attention of the Prince, the girls find themselves magically transformed as they learn to “cross and uncross [their] legs, . . . to run like a double-dutch rope, and how to walk down to the corner so that the shoes talk back to you” (40). Suddenly the girls find they are the object of male attention walking in their neighborhood “where the men can’t take their eyes off [them]” (40). The girls also learn that their newly found beauty can result in harmful attention when a drunk bum offers Rachel a dollar for a kiss (41). Cisneros demonstrates the completeness of the community’s adherence to the connection of romantic love and beauty through the rhetoric of the bum’s request in which he tells Rachel that her

“little lemon shoes are so beautiful” and to find out her name tells her that she is a “pretty girl” (41). Rachel responds “just like that” because she is “young and dizzy to hear so many sweet things in one day, even if it is a bum man’s whiskey words saying them” (41).

What I find compelling about “The Family of Little Feet” is the association that Esperanza makes of her, Lucy’s, and Rachel’s feet fitting into high-heeled shoes with romance. Connecting shoe-fitting with Cinderella raises several ideas of romance from an Americanized perspective. Within the Cinderella story several transformations occur, the most obvious being that of ugliness to beauty. Closely connected to beauty in this story is romantic fulfillment, financial prosperity and social status, as Cinderella becomes a princess. There is also the idea that the only reason Cinderella is ugly is because she is made to be her step-mother’s and step-sisters’ servant and, so, she is always covered in dirt and soot, hiding her true beauty. It might even be surmised that Cinderella’s ugliness comes from her step-family’s ugliness toward her in treating her as a slave. The Prince, however, will not recognize this true beauty because it has been covered over by her forced labor. Magic is needed to bring out her beauty so that the Prince can see that she is the one he has been looking for. The Prince would, then, not notice someone who did not look as if she could be a princess.

The transformation that comes over the girls when they are wearing the high-heeled shoes is measured in the responses they get from the men in their community who now react to them as if they are women instead of girls. In the Cinderella fantasy, the male reaction brings about the fulfillment of Cinderella’s dreams: escape from her wicked step-mother and step-sisters, physical beauty, romantic love, wealth and prosperity, and social status as the most important woman in the kingdom. In Esperanza’s neighborhood, however, the effect of looking like a woman threatens the girls with a nightmare in their catching the attention of a



drunk bum. The bum, far from wealthy or even benevolence, offers a dollar for sexual fulfillment for himself in the form of a kiss. Not only is such a request disproportionate to Rachel's age but it presents an unanticipated danger to her instead of the safety of the Cinderella dream of a kind stranger taking care of her.

### The Evidence of Belonging: Ownership

A final aspect of belonging that comes through in the form of romantic fantasy is that of a longing for ownership, expressed through dreams about home ownership, in The Bluest Eye and The House on Mango Street. This longing for a house in both novels serves as a trope simultaneously for belonging to oneself and belonging to the American mainstream culture. This double meaning of the trope of house and property held against the pattern of romantic fantasy reveals the problematics of measuring one's self-worth according to an exclusive ideology. Each novel supplies the standards against which its characters measure themselves in forming their vision of the American Dream. Through investigation of the impact of Pauline's and Esperanza's expectations for ownership, the standards and their problematized outcomes become clear. In The Bluest Eye, the primary measuring tool is the Dick and Jane primer that frames the entire novel and introduces all of the sections about the Breedloves. Morrison adds movies as another powerful medium of formulaic desire for the American Dream. In The House on Mango Street, Cisneros names television, movies, magazines and books as complicit with forming destructive expectations of romance and the American Dream.

The Bluest Eye opens with a Dick and Jane primer that, in a staccato rhythm, relays an image of the perfectly happy American family. The introductory lines present the important facts the primer is designed to relate about the family: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in

the green-and-white house. They are very happy" (TBE 3). Interestingly, the first piece of information given is about the house. The information about the family members are stated in relation to the house, they "live in the green-and-white house." Positioning the family subordinately to the house demonstrates that their value comes in relation to the house that they own, not from themselves. The family members are also one-dimensional: Jane "has a red dress," Mother is "very nice," and Father is "big and strong." Without the depth of live people or a complex world, the Dick and Jane primer offers a false reading of American life. This artificiality is true of the movies that Pauline watches as well. Mapping the Dick and Jane primer onto the fantasy world of movies, its clear that America has no shortage of mediums through which the false hopes of the American Dream can be channeled.

When Pauline indulges herself with movies, Morrison illustrates how the Dick and Jane primer work with the movies to solidify Pauline's fantasy life and her desire to make her life reflect these images. Movies are written in such a way that human commonalities (usually in the form of desires and needs) become emphasized enough so that the particularities of the situations in which the commonalities occur become ignored or overlooked and all the viewer is left with is the feeling that he/she has just experienced something of his/her own life or future life. This happens to Pauline when she sees "at last . . . the darkened woods, the lonely roads, the river banks, the gentle knowing eyes. . . the flawed [becoming] whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt [throwing] away their crutches," (TBE 122) which are reflections of her earlier fantasies as an adolescent. It is this moment of recognition, of almost *déjà vu*, that occurs for Pauline and becomes the key to her submission to these movies as a real life she could and should desire. Since Pauline has this emotional and visual *déjà vu* when watching the movies, she feels understood and known and, then, allows herself to trust the messages she is receiving from the omniscient lens that she believes to be her own eyes. Ownership, then,

becomes very powerful in transferring images presented, in forms such as the Dick and Jane primer and movies, as part of being “American.” Symbolically, for those in pursuit of the American Dream, ownership of the dream is part of Americanization. In fact, the first step in becoming American is to translate the American Dream into *my* dream. The movies that Pauline watches remind her enough of her emotional and spiritual self which acts as the leveling ground to make her feel included enough to “*move right on in them pictures*” (123) without actually seeing herself represented as partaker of the luxuries and dreams the movies present. It is with this ownership of this segment of the American Dream of beauty, romantic love, and wealth that Pauline later transfers that ownership to “owning” the beauty and wealth of the Fisher family she works for as a domestic.

Pauline’s spiral into fantasy is completed through her taking on the role of “the ideal servant.” When she goes to work for the Fisher family, Pauline takes in all of their material wealth and “love[s] all of it” (TBE 127). Here in this house Pauline finds “beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (127). She comes to see the Fisher household as her house standing in “*her* kitchen at the end of a day and survey[ing] *her* handiwork” (my emphasis 128). What escapes Pauline, and Morrison demonstrates in painful irony, is that the very situation she wished to be taken from as a teenage girl, keeping her mother’s house, becomes the means through which she fulfills her fantasy of beauty and belonging in the Fisher household.

Pauline’s sense of belonging in the Fisher household comes from her role as “ideal servant” fulfilling “practically all of her needs” (TBE 127). It is not surprising that Pauline’s needs are met through a vicarious life of fantasy in her devotion to the Fisher family. In this household Pauline experiences the transformation from deformity to wholeness because “here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound” (127). She finds

beauty in “the child’s pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers” and finds order, cleanliness, abundance and power “reign[ing] over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks, even months; she was queen of canned vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes” (127 – 28). For the first time, power is a part of Pauline’s dreams, whereas she was content with passive reception as a younger woman.

The conscious desire for control that Pauline now experiences is part of her Americanization. Pauline thinks that she has found wholeness in the Fisher household and the fulfillment of her dreams. But she is not valued as a member of the Fisher family, only for her usefulness to them as a servant, anxious to please. Pauline’s contentment in such a role identifies a particular form of Americanization, that of the American working class who will live to take orders from the upper-middle and upper classes.<sup>7</sup> This specified Americanization is what makes Pauline’s movie going phase so significant—she sees in the movies what she is expected to live out in real life. Having been shown in the movies that beauty, wealth, and security belong to the middle and upper classes of Americans, who are also primarily white at this time, it is not at all inconsistent to Pauline that her only contact with this world is through service to the owners of beauty, wealth and security. Yet, Pauline, fully Americanized, still hopes for the luxuries of the upper classes by vicariously enjoying them in her role as their servant.

Esperanza’s longing for ownership in The House on Mango Street, while not satisfied by a vicarious manifestation, contains similar elements of looking to the American Dream for fulfillment. Simultaneously, within Esperanza’s attraction to this Dream, exists a rejection of its limitations. The first vignette of the novel, “The House on Mango Street,” highlights the

connection of having a house signifying one's belonging in a community. Esperanza's comparison between the house her family lives in and the house they have dreamed about reveals the contrast between the American Dream and the reality of Esperanza's experience:

The house on Mango Street is ours . . . even so, it's not the house we thought we'd get. They [Esperanza's parents] always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year. And our house would have running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V. . . . But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. (HMS 4)

Esperanza reveals immediately that her family has fulfilled the requirement of ownership, demonstrating participation in the American Dream. Ownership alone proves insufficient to satisfy the elements of the Dream, however. There is a specific kind of ownership desired in this vignette, one that meets Esperanza's and her family's expectations that have, in turn, been formed by "the houses on T.V." (4). Additionally, this ownership means permanent acceptance and belonging as the house that Esperanza's parents describe would be "[theirs] for always so [they] wouldn't have to move each year" (4). Stability in belonging solidifies its value through the promise of unconditional acceptance, once having attained it.

Esperanza longs for this stability because she has known the instability of frequent family moves and, more specifically, the insecurity of social rejection. When a nun from her school passes her family's previous apartment on Loomis (street), Esperanza acutely feels the pain of her rejection in response to where Esperanza lives:

Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. . . . Where do you live? she asked. There, I said pointing up to the third

floor. You live *there*? *There*. I had to look where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded.

(HMS, original emphasis 4 – 5)

In order to rectify the pain of “feel[ing] like nothing,” Esperanza decides that she needs to take action and prove that she is someone: “I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. *One I could point to*. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it” (my emphasis 5). A house that Esperanza “could point to” would be one like the houses on T.V. that she describes in contrast to the Mango Street house. This house would prove Esperanza's worth and that she belongs. This house would bring Esperanza pride because she can point to it without feeling ashamed of her poverty. Significantly, Esperanza realizes that the house she wants, her parents cannot deliver to her. She says in response to the assurances her parents have given in the past, that the Mango Street house is just “[f]or the time being” and “temporary,” that she “know[s] how [these] things go” (5). So, while Esperanza realizes that the American Dream of home ownership does not happen the way it does on T.V., she still holds on to the idea that she can have a house of her own.

Mitigating shame is a recurring quest for Esperanza in relation to belonging and her desire for a house. In “Bums in the Attic,” she says, “I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works” (HMS 86). She then explains that her family goes out every Sunday to look at all the houses of the wealthy who “forget those . . . who live too much on earth” (86) and that she no longer goes. Her father wonders if she is “[g]etting too old,” and her sister, Nenny, says that Esperanza is “[g]etting too stuck up” but Esperanza confides that she does not “tell them [she] is ashamed—all of [them] staring out the window like the hungry” and

that she is “tired of looking at what [they] can’t have” (86). While Esperanza is no different from her family in desiring the luxurious houses, she is more self-conscious that this desire has turned her family into a spectacle to be pitied. Further, Esperanza’s shame seems to stem from an association of her own poverty with that of “the hungry” who long for food but have no agency with which to buy it. The hunger, however, does not go away simply because it is not fulfilled. Similarly, Esperanza’s desire for a house remains even though she will not visually indulge it on a weekly basis with her family. Esperanza determines in this vignette, once again, that “[o]ne day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from” (87). For the first time, Esperanza decides to associate herself with her community’s poverty and, in doing so, introduces her conflict with belonging to the people of Mango Street but desiring to leave them.

In “The Three Sisters” Esperanza is approached by Lucy and Rachel’s three aunts who come to their sister’s baby’s funeral. They ask Esperanza to wish for something and she secretly wishes to leave Mango Street. One of the sisters calls Esperanza over and tells her to remember to return for the others in her neighborhood because she “will always be Esperanza. [She] will always be Mango Street. [She] can’t erase what [she] knows. [She] can’t forget who [she is]” (HMS 105). When Esperanza is talking to Alicia about not having a house and Alicia tells her she lives “right here, 4006 Mango,” Esperanza tries to deny her house and life on Mango Street by saying that she “[does not] belong. [She does not] ever want to come from [Mango Street]” (106). Alicia responds by telling Esperanza that “[I]ike it or not [she is] Mango Street” (107). Esperanza’s later acknowledgment of her connection to Mango Street and the people of her community allow her to determine to return in the final vignette, “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes,” even though “one day [she] will go away” (110). Esperanza’s statement that she is “too strong for [Mango] to keep [her] here forever” suggests that

Esperanza believes she can rise above the downward pull of class, race and gender discrimination in mainstream American society. The questions Esperanza predicts her friends and neighbors will ask point to education<sup>8</sup> as her path to leave Mango Street: “What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?” (110). Esperanza’s response to their musings, “They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110) describe her unshaken determination to make her way in American society and then, theoretically, return to Mango Street to point to the door for those she has left behind. Specifically, those who are left are the women of Mango Street to which she concentrates so much attention through her storytelling.

### Conclusions

What both The Bluest Eye and The House on Mango Street demonstrate is “the fact of Americanness” which overshadows all lenses through which any American can evaluate “American” identity. Regardless of whether or not one “buys into” the American Dream, the reality remains that there is no way not to be influenced by it because this dream is simply a part of being American. In other words, if the primary function of the American Dream is to belong, and, once belonging, use all resources available to achieve one’s greatest potential (whether financially, relationally, artistically etc.), then dominant cultural ideologies are going to be based in this idea of belonging through achievement of one’s personal development. The problem of this desire for belonging and the ability to achieve one’s potential is that under an exclusive ideology like the American Dream, belonging and achievement are already restricted to a certain kind of person and a certain kind of achievement. While both The Bluest Eye and



The House on Mango Street are connected through their “Americanness,” I think one of the primary differences between The Bluest Eye and The House on Mango Street is their approach to “the fact of Americanness.”

The Bluest Eye seems to say that African Americans, particularly women, can expect to encounter some form of the conflicting ideologies at work in the novel. These conflicting ideologies will systematically render defeat of belonging to the American community in any way that would enable African American women self-definition. I surmise that Morrison does not necessarily have a problem with the American ideology of belonging to a larger community wherein one can develop his/her potential and standard of living, except that this American ideology becomes an exclusive ideology, and does not remain egalitarian as it seems. So I do not think that The Bluest Eye says that the American Dream, or being American, is a bad idea in and of itself but that what being American has come to mean, the “right” people getting the “right” standard of living and material goods to show that they belong, is destructive. Morrison then chronicles that destructiveness through characters like Pauline and Pecola, showing the evil of ideologies that claim to give everything to everyone but deliver only to the few.

In a similar way, The House on Mango Street demonstrates a destructive side of the American Dream, but it is first and foremost a critique of Chicano patriarchal dominance and hegemonic oppression of women. Cisneros presents the definite disillusion one can encounter, particularly women, in desiring what the Dream offers. But her final analysis seems to be that the American Dream is the only shot Esperanza has at making a new life for herself outside of her patriarchal community. This may indicate a naïveté on Cisneros’ part in understanding that there are many empty promises within the American Dream, but I think, more accurately, there is a more complex ambivalence in the attitudes presented about the American Dream and the

promise of hope in assimilation into mainstream American culture through The House on Mango Street.

What makes Cisneros' critique of the American Dream ambivalent, particularly when put alongside Morrison's, is that The House on Mango Street functions very much like the American Dream in its seductive lyricism, which almost makes the reader forget that Esperanza is relating some very painful circumstances in her community. Time and again, Cisneros almost romances the reader into the arms of the American Dream but this does not definitively make her an assimilationist. Comparing the way Cisneros ends The House on Mango Street with how Morrison ends The Bluest Eye demonstrates the lyricism in Esperanza's conclusions that produce ambivalent responses to the American Dream:

One day I [Esperanza] will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out.  
(HMS 110)

Throughout her narrative Esperanza has spoken of the economic inequities she has seen in her community, as compared to the images on T.V.; she has told about abused and imprisoned women; she has told about her mother who quit school because she did not have nice clothes and, yet, Esperanza seems to still embrace the American Dream and the determination to hope for its making good on its promise. Looking at Morrison's ending of The Bluest Eye, a far darker conclusion is made to the novel's action. Claudia is talking about seeing the now mad Pecola wandering about the town's garbage and wondering what she is looking for. Her

response is to look back at her own specific failure of planting marigold seeds too deeply in the earth, keeping them from growing. The marigolds relate to Pecola's potential beauty that neither Pecola nor her community saw. Claudia concludes:

The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late. (TBE 206)

Morrison uses lyricism like Cisneros, but with a much more overtly painful effect, and so, a much more obvious rejection that the tenets of the American Dream can pose any hope for African Americans.

Cisneros has been criticized as "assimilationist" and her images oversimplified<sup>9</sup> in her use of the image of a house. She alternatively has been lauded for presenting an image of the Chicana who can blend her Mexican culture with Anglo-American culture (Karafilis 65 – 66). However, I am not satisfied with either of these readings. I find that Cisneros' narrative style in The House on Mango Street demonstrates the "reality" of ambivalence toward the American Dream that is a part of responding to it as a non-white American. Looking back to the idea I presented earlier, of the "fact of Americanness" which requires that Americans live amidst the tenets of American ideology, encompassed in the American Dream, Cisneros demonstrates the ways in which non-white Americans find themselves alternately attracted and repulsed by the American Dream. While Morrison presents a clear resistance to being completely drawn into the attractiveness of the American Dream, she does not have Claudia finally renounce her citizenship. So Claudia, while apparently more ideologically aware than perhaps Esperanza is, is

still operating under the same dynamics of being American. It is too late for Pecola, but Claudia does not state that it is too late for her.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> My label of “American ethnic literature” for the purposes of this paper refers to literatures of the United States that are written by non-white authors. This is a general working definition of American ethnic literature since the definition itself is fraught with debate. I do not deny the ethnic reality of those considered “white” in America but am working within the popularized idea that discussion of ethnicity is only relevant to non-white ethnicities.

<sup>2</sup> By a “de-ethnicized white American identity,” I mean the construction of the idea that all Americans who are of European descent are no longer attached to their respective ethnic descents. Instead, having come to America, all such histories are blended into the mythological ahistoric and homogeneous “white” race. Eric Foner in “Who is An American? The Imagined Community in American History,” briefly correlates the emergence of the “white American” to the need for national unity during World War II (436 – 37). James Baldwin discusses this absence of ethnic identity as “the price of the white ticket” in his essay “The Price of the Ticket” (835 – 842).

<sup>3</sup> I place “American Dream” in quotes here to signify its symbolic purpose in defining American values and desires. I also find these quotes useful to recognize the mutability of these values and desires over time. For the sake of convenience, I will not use quotations for the remainder of the essay, but will capitalize the American Dream to represent American ideology.

<sup>4</sup> In my parenthetical references, The Bluest Eye is represented by TBE and The House on Mango Street by HMS.

<sup>5</sup> In the Grimm brothers’ fairy tale, “Rapunzel,” a prince hears Rapunzel singing and overhears the witch, who keeps her captive, ask her to let her hair down in order to enter the tower. He repeats this request to Rapunzel when the witch leaves in order to meet her. The prince asks Rapunzel to marry him on their first meeting (Grimm 493 – 97).

<sup>6</sup> In saying that movies do not require their viewers to work, I do not mean that mental exertion of any kind may not be required. Certainly, the exertion of comprehension is necessary to grasp the movie’s sequence of action and the conflict or conflicts the movie presents and resolves. However, the need for attentiveness to a movie’s content for comprehension is different than a critical stance during movie watching. In my discussion of how movies work ideologically, I mean that movies do not ask the viewer to be critical of its content but to comprehend it and accept it.

<sup>7</sup> See “Reconciliation of the Heritages,” pages 259 – 308, from William Thomas’ Old World Traits Transplanted for one example of early twentieth century sociological studies of immigrants to American and their Americanization. He discusses the immigrant bringing labor value to the nation but to regard immigrants as a “merely material value” would have a negative affect on them as seen in examples of American slavery and Austrian and Russian laborers in Germany. The negative affects are due to “visitors” who are “disorderly, unsanitary, or

ignorant” and that “the group which incorporates them, even temporarily, will not escape the bad effects of this [behavior]” (263). Thomas’ solution is to assimilate immigrants in order to bring “their attitudes and values, their ideas on the conduct of life, . . . into harmony with our own [America’s]” (265). Incidentally, he also describes each country as having some “undeveloped material” and included in that of America in 1921 were “the Negroes and Indians, the Southern mountaineers, the Mexicans and Spanish-Americans, and the slums” (264).

<sup>8</sup> See also the vignette, “A Smart Cookie” (HMS 90 – 91) where Esperanza’s mother tells her to “go to school. Study hard.” Ostensibly, this is to make sure that Esperanza has choices for her life, the greatest being freedom from the compulsion to marry in order to survive. While Esperanza’s reference to books and papers also point to her desire to continue her writing, I find it too narrow a reading to have this reference only signify Esperanza, the writer, and to ignore her mother’s exhortations that education means a better life.

<sup>9</sup> See Juan Rodríguez’s “Review of *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros” in the *Austin Chronicle*, August 10, 1984.

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